Breeding Policy - should she stay or should she go?

A correctly planned culling and replacement policy will ensure genetic advancement of the herd and is vital to the economics of the business. The end of calving is the time to make decisions about next year's breeding animals. A cow's history and any current issues should be factored in when deciding whether to put her to the bull again, while considering the animal's welfare and any potential costs involved in getting her fit for service. It is often easy to let her go 'one more time', but in general previous problems serve as a black mark and these cows should be removed. So, what key factors should we focus on?

Reproductive performance:
Barren cows are a drain on resources. Any empty cows are likely to be overfat which has a further negative effect on fertility - reproductive hormones are dampened down, cows still fail to get quickly in calf and the cycle perpetuates resulting in an obese, still empty animal. Even if these cows are to hold this time, they are likely to remain over-conditioned until calving which itself predisposes to calving problems.

Previous problems at or around calving:
A hard calving in an individual animal should raise alarm bells. In heifers, this may be due to poor sire selection or inadequate growth prior to calving, but also down to an abnormally narrow pelvis. Any cow who required major assistance at calving should be examined thoroughly at your pre-breeding vet visit; an untreated metritis or severe vaginal damage will hamper a successful conception at mating. Subclinical milk fever (no clinical signs) could lead to sub-optimal uterine contractions and can result in a dead, seemingly healthy calf. The risk of milk fever rapidly increases with age and older animals should be culled before they suffer clinical disease. Metabolic disease will also predispose to prolapses. Any cow who has suffered a vaginal or uterine prolapse is likely to prolapse again and should be on the cull list.


Image Courtesy of www.onpasture.com

Mastitis / udder conformation:
Often a cured case of mastitis results in a blind quarter. It is tempting to keep these animals but consider the age of the cow and general udder conformation. Pendulous udders on older cows are far more likely to suffer mastitis and may be difficult for calves to access. Large teats also hamper a newborn calf's ability to take on adequate volumes of colostrum in those vital first hours. It is good practice to run all cows through the crush prior to mating to allow close examination. An active mastitis infection risks spreading to other quarters and these cows should not be bred from again.

Lameness:
Chronically lame cows should be on the cull list - lame cows will eat less and lie down more, predisposing to metabolic issues and reduced milk yield. They are also likely to be underconditioned. It is sometimes possible to block the healthy claw in chronic sole and wall lesions which will at least allow transport directly to slaughter; we can advise on individual cases. Our vet techs offer a 'lame cow service' allowing rapid assessment and treatment of acutely lame animals.

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Disease status:
Johnes positives should be culled after their current calf is weaned and their heifer calves should not be kept as replacements. Johnes transmission primarily occurs when an infected adult cow's dung is ingested by a newborn calf, so confirmed or suspect Johnes cows should be kept well away from young calves, their dung never being allowed to contaminate communal calving areas. If BVD tag and testing is used, remember that a Persistently Infected (PI) dam will always give birth to a PI calf. The dam of a BVD positive calf should also be tested, unless previously negative. All PIs should be isolated and removed from the herd. We can advise on herd disease screening as well as testing of individual animals.

When you consider that half a calf's DNA make-up comes from its mother, and your most genetically superior animals are likely to be your maiden heifers, it pays to breed from a young, healthy herd.

Claire Rudd
Veterinary Surgeon

Is your bull fit and ready to go?

You thought it would never come but it has! Spring is here and along with it, spring calving. In fact, by the time you are reading this spring calving should be over. If it is not, if 60% of the cows that you put to the bull last summer did not calve within three weeks of the start of calving or if more than 6 or 8% of those cows did not conceive within ten or twelve weeks then you are losing money and we need to investigate.

Reasons for poor reproductive performance in suckler herds are, of course, many and varied. Nutrition, including mineral nutrition, and infectious disease are common causes of poor performance. Poor bull performance can also have a significant impact; lets face it, the impact of a single infertile cow in a suckler herd is one less calf but the impact of a single infertile bull is many fewer calves (and no calves if you run a single bull!).

With bulls due to be put back with the cows in only a few weeks to ensure next springs calving, now is the time to take steps to ensure, as far as is possible, they will be fully fertile when they're working. We can help with this, starting with a full physical examination to make sure body condition is adequate and mobility is sound so that they can get to and mount bulling cows. It may also be useful to take blood samples to check their BVD and Johne's disease status. A more detailed examination of the bull's reproductive apparatus will then be carried out, to ensure no abnormalities exist that may affect sperm production or his ability to serve an bulling cow. Any disparities in testicular size and consistency and any penile abnormalities and their possible significance will be discussed.

After all this, a semen sample will be collected and examined on farm (to ensure adequate numbers of live, progressively motile sperm cells are being produced) and back at the lab (to ensure these sperm cells have a normal morphology).

A bull breeding soundness examination (BBSE), however, does not guarantee a successful serving period. It is important, even after a BBSE has been passed with flying colours, that bull performance continues to be monitored during the serving period. Has he suddenly become lame? Has a problem arisen that prevents him successfully serving cows? Monitoring return rates can provide an early indication of sudden onset infertility.

Even if all seems well, PDing your cows during the autumn is another sound investment. Decisions can be made about the future of animals that have failed to conceive; should they be carried round to be served again next year or, particularly if stocks of winter forage are short, should they be culled before winter housing? Even if the worst has happened and barren rates are high, how much better to know early so the situation can be managed rather than finding out next spring when calving fails to start!?

Keith Cutler
Veterinary Surgeon

Flies– are they worrying you and your cattle?

Flies are a nuisance but bees are worse… or so the verse goes! And indeed this is true, though bees very rarely trouble cattle.

2020 was a troublesome year in more ways than one, but especially for fly numbers following the spring weather, which favoured their hatching and proliferation; the frosty nights in April 2021 may help prevent such numbers plaguing us and our cattle this year, but they will be here again for sure.

The majority of flies that affect cattle are Head flies, Face flies, Stable flies and Horn flies (though these are predominantly found on the animal's back and can take up to 20 blood meals a day).

The issues they cause are chiefly irritation and nuisance, leading to reduced daily liveweight gain (up to 0.25 kg reduction per day in a recent study), either directly or indirectly via reduced milk production in the dam. Disease transmission occurs with mastitis-causing bacteria (particularly those involved with the Summer Mastitis complex), New Forest Eye (face flies have mouthparts that damage the conjunctiva and cornea leading to the causative bacterium, *Moraxella bovis*, attaching and causing the typical white spot and conjunctivitis) and IBR and PI3 viruses.

Control is by a variety of methods, including Permethrin sprays, ear tags and/or pour-on applications. It is advised that the sprays and the ear tag methods are used when the flies start to appear, whilst the pour-ons need to be given at least a week before the flies appear so as to become incorporated in the skin's secretions. Cattle ranging on moors and plains can be also given access to brushes with insecticide delivered into them.

Attention to the environmental sources of flies is also recommended, such as avoidance or removal of typical egg-laying sites like manure piles, rotting forage or grains as well as damp wooded areas with

rotting vegetation below the tree canopy. It might be a little late now and perhaps more suited to the dairy situation, but some farms are utilising parasitic wasps to lay their eggs on such habitats so that their hatching larval stage actively seek out nuisance fly eggs as a source of food. This reduces the number of flies hatching out after the winter.

Time spent planning and implementing preventative strategies now will pay dividends later! Contact dispensary for more information on your preferred treatments.

Mike Kerby
Veterinary Surgeon

Worming: reducing treatment and improving results

Worming is considered a routine task on many farms, but there is much we can do to reduce our reliance on it. Cutting wormer use saves animal handling, time and money and demonstrates that all veterinary medicines are used responsibly, not just antibiotics.

Rule 1: Reduce exposure

There are two main gut worms, *Ostertagia ostertagi* and *Cooperia oncophora*. If animals are naïve to these species (usually in their first grazing season), it is very likely you will see parasitic gastroenteritis (PGE) and have to treat. Much better is to put those animals on pasture that was not grazed last year and therefore is carrying far fewer worms.

Pastures to avoid are those grazed by youngstock within six months, since they tend to produce the highest number of eggs. Alternating cattle and sheep reduces infection left behind on pasture but can compromise control of liver fluke. As summer progresses, hay or silage aftermaths may become available which have reduced or no burden.

Rule 2: Establish need for treatment

PGE causes reduced weight gain (even condition loss) through appetite suppression, as well as through altered digestion and nutrient deprivation. Regular weighing is essential to detect slowing weight gains, enabling treatment to start before economic loss grows.

Worm egg counts (WECs) may help rule out PGE when nutrition or other infectious disease is responsible for ill thrift. Always interpret WECs alongside animal performance: they can be elevated when animals are performing well, or appear to be low whilst actually causing a problem, through dilution in large volumes of dung.

Rules for responsible PGE control:

1. Reduce exposure
2. Establish need for treatment
3. Treat responsibly
4. Select appropriate product
5. Avoid resistance

When considering treating, take into account not only time of year but also whether production is being limited e.g. poor growth. If so, talk to your vet about the best product and use worm egg counts to monitor burdens during grazing.

Rule 3: Treat responsibly

If using strategic (preventative) worming, perhaps with long-acting boluses or injections, target youngstock in the first two months of the grazing season. This is when egg shedding is at its highest and control here will have the biggest benefit. Ensure you start strategic control at three weeks post-turnout to achieve an effective reduction in shedding. Once animals have been treated, you may return to the monitoring mentioned above, including WECs, providing monitoring is kept up throughout the season.

Rule 4: Select appropriate product

Which product to use is the most common discussion we have. It's important to discuss your strategy for PGE control with your vet before selecting a product, as this may reveal some other options (see rule 1) that don't require buying wormers at all. Rule 3 may dictate whether long- or short-acting products are more appropriate, but ultimately it is the correct administration and timing that is important.

Rule 5: Avoid resistance

Integral to responsible treatment is responsible handling of the medicines themselves. This starts with using products that are in date, have been stored correctly and have not been broached beyond the labelled time. To limit resistance, as well as achieve a good response, ensure you are dosing to the correct weight. An actual recording is always better than estimating, as research has showed both vets and farmers tend to underestimate weights. Drenching/dosing syringes can become inaccurate over time and contribute to both poor treatment responses and resistance, which is being increasingly reported.

Tom Warboys
Veterinary Surgeon

Seasonal Dispensary Offers

Please see the flyer enclosed for further products and information

SPOTINOR
250ML £30
500ML £43

AUTOWORM FIRST GRAZER
Single Bolus £15.83

TAURADOR
1L £68 2.5L £105
5L £185

All prices EX VAT and correct at time of print 01.06.21. Offer ends 30.06.21.
For a full list of promotions please call Dispensary on **01935 83682.**

Medicines Update:

Adrenacaine 100ml

Due to a nationwide manufacturing problem with **Adrenacaine,** we will now be supplying **Pronestesic** as an alternative local anaesthetic. This previously needed to be stored in the fridge but re-licensing has meant that it can now be stored at an ambient temperature.

Spirovac - 5 Dose

Following a long supply problem, we are pleased to inform you that **Spirovac 5 Dose** is now available to order.

Please consult your **Vet** to discuss any specific queries.
For further information please call our **Dispensary Team on 01935 83682.**

Nutrition pre and post calving: why does it matter?

As spring herd mating season and autumn herd calving approaches, now is a good time to emphasise some important points when it comes to suckler cow nutrition.

We are not just considering getting cows in the correct body condition pre-calving (not too thin, not too fat) but also ensuring that the energy, protein and micronutrient demands of the cow are being met in the different stages of pregnancy as well as in early lactation and the critical mating period that follows. We need our suckler cows to produce one calf per year to be profitable. The ability to do this is influenced by a number of factors and, if broken down into three key areas, we can see what a crucial role nutrition plays:-

Number of calves conceived

There are many factors that influence conception rate including bull fertility and infectious disease but one of the most important, is cow nutrition and body condition. A cow in **poor body condition at calving and/or in a negative energy balance in the last month of calving:-**

- will need to draw on body reserves during the period of very high energy demand that follows ie: lactation. She will prioritise milk production and consequently **fertility will suffer** - due to poor egg quality and development, delayed ovulation, reduced hormone production and negative effects on the uterine environment, reducing the chance of embryo implantation.
- is more likely to suffer from **post-calving problems** such as **retained cleansings** or **uterine infections.** As a result of these she **may take longer to return to cycling and is less likely to hold to service.**

Conversely **over-conditioning** can result in fat accumulation within the liver which impairs liver function, reducing the production and metabolism of critical hormones required for reproduction, resulting in a negative effect on ovarian follicular activity. **Trace elements can also play an important role in fertility**. Deficiencies in selenium and copper can result in higher barren rates.

Number of calves alive (birth-weaning)

Cows in **poor body condition at calving or cows in a negative energy balance in the last month of calving:-**

- will have a depressed immune system and produce **poorer quality colostrum and lower yields**, increasing the risk of disease and death in calves.
- **can have delayed or slow calving which can result in calf death or calves born weak**, subsequently slow to suckle.
- are more likely to **produce calves that struggle to maintain their own body temperatures after birth,** and hence are at higher risk of chilling.
- **are more likely to lie down more post calving,** limiting sucking opportunities for the calf in the crucial first hours.

Cows that are over conditioned can have calving difficulties due to excess fat in the pelvis. This tends to be the result of **incorrect nutrition in mid gestation** and not in the last month of gestation, where it is essential that a cow's energy needs are met.

Trace elements such as Iodine can influence calf vigour. In iodine deficient herds, calves can be slow to stand and suckle or even be stillborn. Iodine can also be lacking in herds grazing turnips and other brassicas due to compounds within these feed stuffs blocking the availability of iodine within the body.

Growth rate of calves

Nutrition during all stages of pregnancy will have an influence on foetal growth and development. Low levels of feeding during last third of pregnancy will not change calf birth weight however (or risk of calving issues), as suckler cows use their reserves to buffer the nutrient supply to the calf. The growth rate of calves in the early pre-weaning period is directly proportional to **their mother's milk supply**, which is reflective of maternal nutrition both pre and post calving.

Nutritional stress around calving will have an immunosuppressive effect on the cow and thus increase the likelihood of cows shedding higher numbers of worm eggs on to the pasture. These **worm burdens will build on the pasture** over the summer, to be ingested by calves, with negative effects on growth rates.

Trace elements again can play a critical role in calf growth. If deficiencies are noted in the adult herd, it is prudent to monitor calf status as calves approach weaning and switch over to forage as their main nutritional source.

Over-feeding heifers will result in accumulation of fat in their udders, reducing overall lifetime milk yield – pretty critical if breeding your own replacements.

So what can we do to make a difference?

1. **Speak to your vet about a nutrition plan for your cows**
2. **Carry out cow body condition scoring at regular intervals year round**
3. **Analyse your forage and formulate diets accordingly**
4. **Approximately 4 weeks before the calving period, carry out a metabolic blood screen of 6-8 cows to assess energy, protein and trace element status**
5. **Think about nutrition throughout the year, plan ahead, include contingencies for unexpected weather such as drought or snow**

Louise Silk
Veterinary Surgeon

Safe Use of Veterinary Medicines for Suckler Herds Course - Online £75 +VAT

It is a Red Tractor recommendation that one person from each farm has attended a course on handling and administration of veterinary medicines. Our course satisfies this recommendation and is aimed at herdsmen and members of the team administering or handling medicines. **Certificate included at end of course.**

For further details, please call the practice on 01935 83682.

Farm walk and discussion

We welcome all suckler clients to a farm walk and discussion on **Tuesday 6th July** at Enford Farm, Salisbury Plain, with **James Waight, Farmers' Weekly Beef Farmer of the Year.** Refreshments provided. Further details to follow. Numbers may be limited due to COVID restrictions so please book ahead by calling the practice on 01935 83682.